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# Female Body and Sexual Politics in Margaret Atwood's Selected Novels

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**ABSTRACT.** Margaret Atwood is the most prominent Canadian writer. Her feminist ideology is clearly obvious in her novels. She overtly illustrates her feminism view in human rights equality and freedom of choice. Atwood's works are consisted of the fundamental freedom and human rights. In general, her fictions truly portray the women's rights that are equal to men's rights. Social constructions of gender are attacked by Atwood's novels. Her stories represent the silence and sexual discrimination in female characters. She is not only looking for annihilating of the gender system i.e. women's subjugation, but look at men and women at the same level in society. Female bodies in Atwood's point of view have been captured in patriarchal societies. Female protagonists in the selected novels explain noticeable symbols of bodily nervousness. Female characters are mostly used as objects in Atwood's stories. Women are considered as a tool or toy, as if they have no feelings, opinions or rights of their own. Body in female characters plays an important role and it is symbol of sexuality. Female body in Atwood's selected stories is under the cruel dominance by male and that is what she always tries to portray under the sexual politics. This paper aims to illustrate sexual politics though female body in Atwood's selected works.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study surveys the female protagonist's way in which their fear, fault, anger, and repression of individuality is enhanced within the story. Actually, Atwood tries to remind us women's everyday jobs and portrays the women's victimization through silence they have to have due to the political situation. Slowly as the novels clarify, female characters go in the course of a procedure of introversion, self-psychoanalysis and self-insight. Finally, they seem more conceived, more in controlled by themselves, and more cooperative. The body in female characters is not detached from their mind and Atwood has laid stress on it all the time in order to interrupt consciousness with body. In this case, bodies become strange and villainous enemies even to their residents. Body in Atwood's selected novels is the source of illnesses. It is also the source of political power which cruelty is applied and practiced. As Dorothy Jones argues, Atwood's stories are always related to women who are "powerless people caught in traps devised by the powerful": here, "power" connect with those who traps either at the macro level (*The Handmaid's Tale*) or at the micro level (*Cat's Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*) (Cambridge Companion p.61). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Edible Woman*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye*, I examine feminist point of view related to politics and sexuality which are inevitable reality or concept in Atwood's selected oeuvres.

## 2. WOMAN AS SILENT AND VICTIMIZED GENDER

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is a long silence that embraced women's protagonists, their memories and their world which she tries to show and break it. This novel illustrates the females' need for voice and words in which they are controlled by government. Female protagonist in this novel lives in a society where silence has been forced on women and highlights a masculine society for readers. As a matter of fact, it portrays a "victimized and oppressed female gender" (Soofastaei and Mirenayat). Tyrannical restrictions are uncovered by Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in which it subdues women's individuality. Characters use inner

language to show their inside chaos. In this story Offred is sick and tired of being silent. She is “tired of this melodrama. I am tired of keeping silent”. (305)

*The Handmaid's Tale* is about Offred, the main female character, in Republic of Gilead community. Handmaids should bring children for privileged families, who have problem. Offred is selected for the commander and his wife. She is not her real name in the story. In fact, the handmaids' names followed by "of" which is at the beginning of every servant. Offred says, "*My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden*" (37). Women's suppression and marginalization is obvious in Atwood's patriarchal society. Anyway, a voice is given to Offred by Atwood. She states in a fury and finds a way for changing situation. Margaret Atwood's clash in her novel, on the other hand, is not only to depict woman's involvement in the procedures that lead to her victimization but she wants to investigate the possible ties of fighting patriarchal structures to power and supremacy that rejects female's equal asserts as an individual in society.

In *Bodily Harm*, other story of Atwood, female characters are shown as imperfect creatures. Lora and Rennie, who have shared a small room, went for a kind of relationship by force. The main character, Rennie, who suffers from breast cancer, viewed herself as a damaged sex machine. Lora's stories are intertwined with Rennie. While Lora is telling about her stories, Rennie doesn't pay attention to her and only look at Lora's opening and closing mouth. Rennie scorns Lora when she finds out that Lora is prostituting herself to buy some luxuries from the prison guards. Rennie refuses her compassion from Lora like society until Lora revolts against their captors. Lora comes from a working class with immoral acts and behaviors. She lives in a social and sexual repression different from Rennie's. Women's voices like her do not hear in a patriarchal society. Finally, she is sexually assaulted by watchman.

Women in Atwood's stories are victims due to their sex to such an extent this matter makes them to become cruel in some way. So, this issue makes a society in which female characters are at last the silenced and victimized gender in there. As a matter of fact, Atwood aware us for this by the quotation at the beginning of *Bodily Harm*:

A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence...defines what can and cannot be done to her. (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*)

Maybe, the reason that edition also says at the back cover of the paperback would not be irrelevant to this matter. He says:

By turns comic, satiric, relentless, and terrifying, Margaret Atwood's new novel is ultimately an exploration of human defensiveness, the lust for power both sexual and political, and the need for compassion that goes beyond what we ordinarily mean by love.

### 3. PATRIARCHY POWERS UPON WOMEN'S BODY

The difference between “affluent thinking and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics” will be considered in these stories (The London School of Journalism). Atwood's selected novels portray her inner suffering, upset childhood, relation with men, and a cruel society in general. In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood deconstructs Maria's imaginary trip from an adopted position of self-negation and self-effacement towards self-certitude and self-assertion. As Alan Dawe says, Marian can either be the “scheming super female” like Anisley or she can be similar to Clara, “the earth mother” and like the “office virgins”, but these options are on the other hand not satisfactory to Marian. Alan Dawe says: “*The Edible Woman* is a novel about choices.” *The Edible Woman* displays the cruel and hypocritical positions where the society is controlled by male gender during the dramatization and identity crisis in the Marian's soul. Marian is tremendously aware of patriarchy powers upon her body. J. Brooks Bouson states, “Atwood deploys her female protagonist,

Marian MacAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women.”

In this story, Peter is a medical doctor who checks Marian's body. His vision changes after making love with her. His emotions show it through touching his hand "gently over her skin, without passion, almost clinically, as if he could learn by touch whatever it was that had escaped the probing of his eyes”(63). Describing of Marian as sick and upset person on a doctor's check table clearly illustrates a kind of sexual politics at work. The protagonist's body becomes a touchable space for outer and observable factors which are exposed to medical glimpse that examine her body with the purpose of measuring her mentality in order to control her subjectivity.

As for *The Handmaid's Tale*, Mark Evans in his article named '*Versions of history: The Handmaid's Tale and its Dedicatees*' argues, "We observe that Atwood shows Gilead is the harsh Puritanism that worked on severe ideology and cruel organizing"(ibid). Female protagonists in these stories are subjugated by patriarchal power. Their names, identities, freedoms, and free-choices are lost. Offred is bewildered by her identity and even begins to accept the position that has been applied over her. Accepting such fundamental changing so easily may looks weird. Female characters in Atwood's stories have been influenced into the idea that such systems were planned for the benefits of themselves. Peter S. Prescott says: "Offred at first accepts assurance that the new order is for her protection" (Naik 151). She even considers her value as a person who has viable ovary and this negatively impacts on her self-image inevitably. The deploring act is described by Offred: "The commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I don't say making love because that's not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate because it would imply two people, when there is only one. Nor does rape cover it. Nothing was going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice, but there was some and this is what I chose.” (121)

*Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are a notice to women of the post-feminist 1980s. Being obedient for both characters, Rennie and Offred, is taken diverse forms within the two novels. Offred's society is completely loss of freedom due to the lack of attention is paid. In such society, female characters have no right to have any communication and they present the human enslavement clearly. They are deprived of any rights that a human should have them such as family, memory, freedom, free choice, and identity. For instance, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are classified to different goals. They are made to wear special uniform with various colors to categorize them into their special positions. In this case, they are kept in separate controlled places and are often named by their Commanders to be identified in relation with men.

Atwood's writing related to power and sexual politics is clearly depicted in her other novel called *The Blind Assassin*. Iris Chase in this novel for example, talks about the contuses left on her body by her sexually cruel husband in phrases of “a kind of code, which blossomed, then faded, like invisible ink held to a candle. But if they were a code, who held the key to it?” Here the flesh is literally made word as the contusions become a kind of writing that suggests an allegorical proof. Iris then tells of the feeling of annihilation she experienced as a consequence of her husband's cruelty: “I was sand, I was snow – written on, rewritten, smoothed over” (*BA*, p. 271).

Iris appears from her sexual and textual cruelty “smoothed over” and therefore efficiently removed: she is the disempowered victim of wider powers and it is important that the means through which she states her feeling of fundamental disempowerment includes an image that positions the body as allegorical text. Images of removal litter Atwood's fictive autobiographies of women struggling to write their tales of weak lives.

#### 4. BODY AS A LANGUAGE AND REALITY OF CONSUMERISM

*The strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the control of men has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievements in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. – Simon de Beauvoir*

Atwood's female characters' body connects to culture and society. Body in Atwood's oeuvres are not at all objective things but are constantly active expressions of territory of quarrels. In order to comprehend Atwood's oeuvre completely we have to realize how these quarrels are shaped and what the terms of conflict are. Their bodies *are* their stories and to write one they must write the other in a language able of stating both. Therefore Marian's weird anorexia in Atwood's first story, the trouble-making anti-comedy, *The Edible Woman*, where the protagonist's harm of appetite indicates an opposition to pre-designated roles as both consumed and consumer. Atwood's female characters' body is inevitably coded as body in which the story considers it as political and economic object. Characters within the story try to prove that their bodies have changed into consumer goods which recoil them, control them physically, and maintain them silence. Therefore Marian's weird anorexia in Atwood's first story, the trouble-making anti-comedy, *The Edible Woman*, where the protagonist's harm of appetite indicates an opposition to pre-designated roles as both consumed and consumer.

Food metaphor in *The Edible Woman* shows a significant part related to the meaning of the novel. According to Rama Devi,

More than food gets eaten in a capitalist and patriarchal society dominate conspicuous consumption, rationality and industrialism, where there is no Place for the attitudes, desires, beliefs and opinions expressed by the females, the central figures of Margaret Atwood's fiction (110).

All of Atwood's female storytellers of their own stories are emerging from a lifetime of enforced or self-imposed silence (the auditory equivalent of void) and this in part considers for the repeated images and allegories related to muteness, secretiveness, and tonguelessness in the novels talked about here. In addition, each story suggests dynamic displays of the negative response or draw back from "the word": in *Cat's Eye*, for instance, the backdated narrative attributes an episode where the traumatized Elaine vomits her lunch of alphabet soup onto fresh snow. With her burgeoning painter's eye the young Elaine mentions how colorful the half-digested soup seems in opposition to its pure white backdrop as she remarks "here and there a ruined letter" (*CE*, p. 137). In this episode we discover an image allegorically describing as Elaine's draw back from language which finally consequences in her shelter in painting, a non-verbal mode of communication. Her body has refused the word, her body progressively becomes to her "the uncanny stranger on display," and only when body and word reattach can Elaine write her story. Similar episodes including active allegories of word-rejection mess up Atwood's fictive autobiographies and each certifies to the strangely voiceless life of its narrator.

Atwood writes their female characters' life in periods which she pays attention to their roles as silent objects. Their autobiographies seem to appear in a stream although the tension of suppression has burst forth in a torrent of words reattaching body and text. All have felt driven away from the world of words, the male discussion, as from their bodies during their lives, but they have at last broken their silence and in doing so they make disruptive and even hazardous narrative declarations. Their stories may be small amount in terms of public incident nevertheless Elaine, Joan, and Iris "draw their stories into history" by dividing their stories with obtained editions of history "Medusa" (*CE*, p.338).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood is obviously related to the coalition of power that applies physical, political, economic and social control over woman to splinter her. In her writings she confirms, the things that man do, woman can do better. They are neither incomplete physically nor mentally. They hold the bridles of power tightly in their hands. In her feminist writings growth of her protagonist is not very soft nevertheless they conquest eventually through many calculated retreats. It becomes gradually more obvious that man's powerful position has been destabilized and he is losing out in the match of power as he is finding himself unable of victimizing and threatening women for his individual again. Her writings concentrate on woman's recognition of power control and self-awareness.

As an artist she recognizes the situation of women painting in patriarchal society. Through her paintings she wishes a society, which does not damage and exclude women from superiority. Characters in the novels of Margaret Atwood, give us with a map of the spiritual circumstance of contemporary Canadian literature with exact reference to their physical and social environment. The most remarkable feature of her stories is that her characters problems and sufferings, requirements and mistakes and their capability to knowingly or unknowingly hurt others and makes her readers respond to them not as imaginary characters but as live human beings. Although she is definitely helpful of feminist subjects like women's problems and estrangement caused by their politics situation in patriarchy, she rejects to go to war in opposition to men, instead she trusts in characteristic of both sexes.

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